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# MONDRIAN

*Sidney Janis Gallery, New York 1974*

COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
*Presented by*
Sidney Janis Gallery.

# PAINTINGS
# DRAWINGS
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# MONDRIAN

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# PREFACE

## Piet Mondrian's Personality

Society wants little or no privacy for its heroes, alive or dead. Time's probe into the dramatic aura of greatness commands no separation between an artist's work and his personal life. It is an essential purpose of this exhibition to give an authentic glimpse into Piet Mondrian's personality.

Born in Amersfoort, at the heart of Holland, one hundred and two years ago, son of the headmaster of a school there, Mondrian is world renowned and his art established historically.

We owe to Mondrian, instrument of his epoch, 1872-1944, the conservation of the traditions of humanism and structure in western art—crystallized and transformed into the new foundations of the emerging style of our century. Revolutionary and controversial, Mondrian's painting and writing have helped bring mankind to new levels of consciousness, to new levels of expressive freedom essential to civilized progress (*progress* understood as the intensification of the humanistic in man). The evolution of his mature thought is available in some forty essays and notes. The writings are to be found among the foremost publications of his time in Holland, France, Germany, England and the United States.

Mondrian always differentiated between the purely intuitive, the universal, and the rational representation of process. He insisted that the writing always followed the direct experience of his art. It was through his painting that Mondrian realized the liberation of perception from the ancient dominating symbolistic and mimetic functions of art, toward what he called *A New Realism* (1943), to an entirely new plateau of relationship to the total environment—inseparable from the social structure of life itself.

Mondrian presaged the synthesis, the symbiosis of painting, sculpture and architecture into an entirely new expression, he saw his art as purely intuitive, as a pioneer step toward the future against the surrounding limitations of the mores, of the dominating past. "If we cannot free *ourselves*, we can free our *vision* . . . Because it is free of all utilitarian limitations, plastic art must move not only parallel with human progress but must advance ahead of it. It is the task of art to express a clear vision of reality." (*Toward the True Vision of Reality*, 1942.)

But what kind of person was Piet Mondrian?

"History" is written—and rewritten—according to variable measures, the values of those who chronicle the image of man through words, through the overwhelming power of language to reflect and shape our perception and prejudice, to prevent or to open our comprehension. Even photographs can give contradictory images, depending upon the moment and the photographer. Naturalistic or veristic description in photography can be as semantically naive as in painting or in writing. Psychologically speaking, characterizations of Mondrian's personality may reflect the measures and the values of the image-maker much more than those of Mondrian.

My own prejudices are based upon our close friendship during the last ten years of Mondrian's life. Until the present, the man and his work are often characterized as "ascetic," "pure," "utopian," among other adjectives. I found a direct, spontaneous, worldly, vital, unpretentious, responsive human being, completely free of *kitsch*, an eternal optimist, with undiminished curiosity and excitement toward the dynamics of social change—to which he contributed so much. One needs only to read Mondrian's writings to appreciate the broad scope of his inclusive interests.

The image of Mondrian as an ascetic or as a recluse is ludicrous, even if one merely observes the international groups, the girl friends, artists, architects, writers, museum curators, collectors, among others who claim to have known him well.

My own first meeting with Mondrian is revealing. I was twenty-two years old, completely unknown to him and unannounced when I knocked at the door of his famous studio in Paris, 26 Rue du Départ, in December of 1934. Mondrian was then sixty-two years old. When the door opened, I simply told him my name, that I was an artist and that I had come to Paris from New York especially to meet with him. After a slight pause, the calm response, "This is very unusual." "Mr. Mondrian," I said, "my French is very limited . . . I hope you will excuse my directness . . ." Hesitation for a moment and then "Please come in."

Until Paris, I had seen only three of his paintings in New York, but I had been bursting for months with thoughts and questions over their significance.

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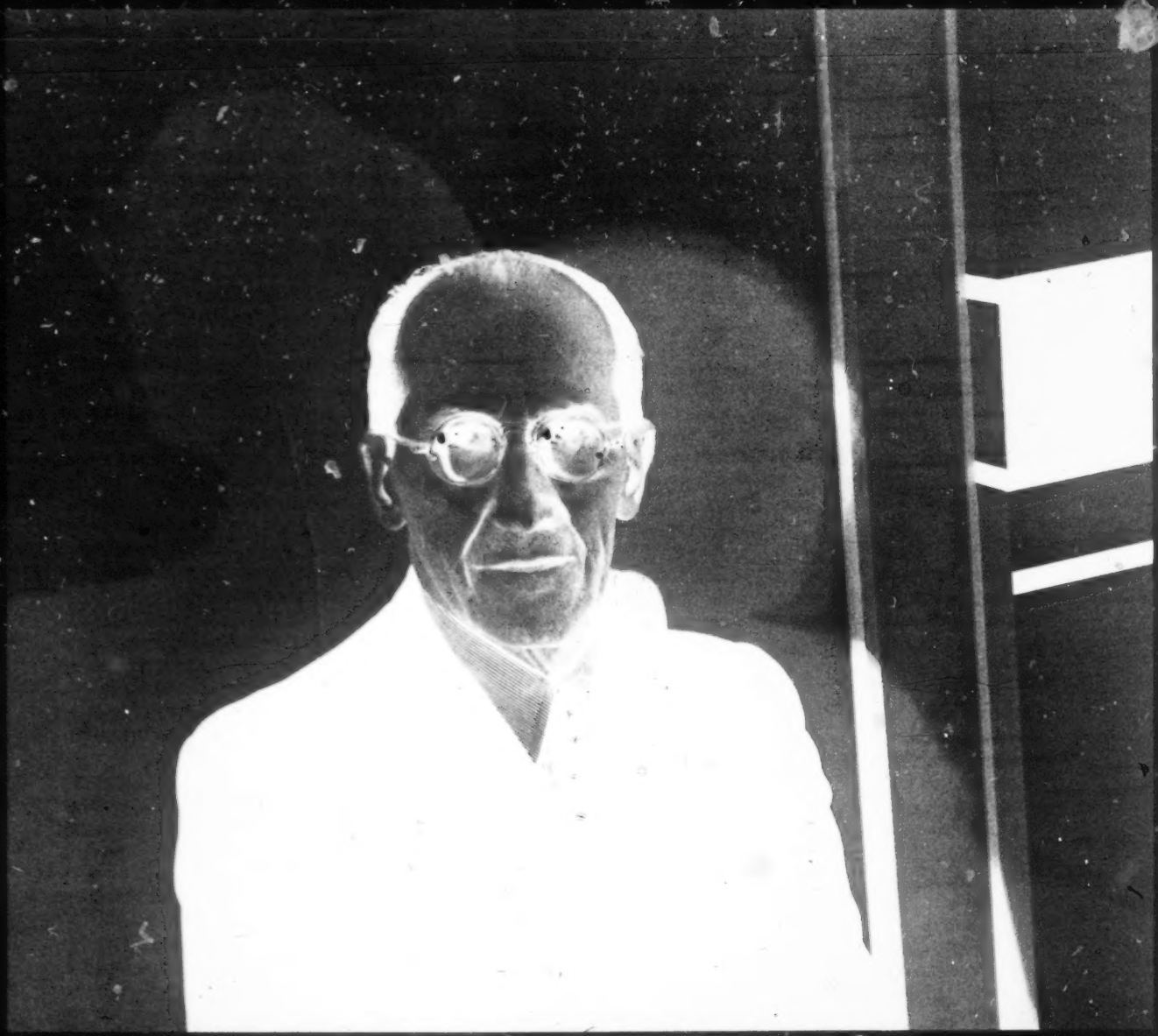

**30** PIET MONDRIAN, New York ca. 1940

We talked for three hours without stopping; immediately we were friends. "Who would you like to meet? How can I help you?" It was through Mondrian that I first met Léger, Gabo, Pevsner, Duchamp, Hélion, Le Corbusier and a host of others.

We were together frequently during the next four months before my return to New York. When I left Paris, his parting words were, in our usual half-French half-English, "Nous sommes comme frères, if I were younger I would go with you." Afterwards we corresponded, and you can imagine my joy when my later good fortune made it possible for me to help him come to New York out of London during the terrible "blitz" bombing of 1940. Here, he frequently repeated that he had never enjoyed life so much.

Although I have no personal knowledge of his younger days, the photos show him first as romantic and then as dapper in appearance, energetic, proud and lively. It should not be forgotten than Mondrian was among the very first in Europe, perhaps anywhere, to perceive and then to write about the important contribution of Black American Jazz and its dances, all of which he enjoyed until the end of his life. In New York he was often with me and others for a "dancing party"; nobody has ever written so brilliantly about the symbolic ambience of the night-club. (*Jazz and Neo-Plastic,* 1927.) It was my pleasure, on his first night in New York, to introduce him to *Boogie-Woogie* music for the first time. His response was immediate, "Enormous!" he repeated, "Enormous!".

It is true, when I knew him, that Mondrian was not a "bon-vivant." His personal life-style was consonant with his work, which demanded great concentration of time and energy, so that his only excesses were on his painting, sometimes to the neglect of his sleep and eating habits. But he was always ready to attend a colleague's "vernissage" and to welcome a friend. He would even invite a sympathetic visitor's reaction to the painting-in-process on the easel. "Do you think this part is quite right?" he might begin . . . Few artists are ever so open.

He was witty too. One night after a party, the two of us were driving a lady friend home in a taxi. She was a famous, sophisticated collector, then the wife of a Surrealist painter, both admirers of Mondrian. As she sat between us, she cuddled herself against Mondrian's shoulder. Piet (then seventy years old) put his arm around her neck and kissed her directly, and long, on her mouth. "Why Mondrian!" she exclaimed, "I thought you were so *pure!*" Afterwards, when she left us, he laughed to me and said, "They (meaning the Surrealists) always call me so 'pure'."

On another occasion I asked Piet why it was that he had never married. He replied, "To tell you the truth, I never could afford it. Once, long ago, I did live with a girl for a time . . . But when we disagreed and we parted," he laughed, reminiscing with mock indignation, "she took *all* the furniture! . . . So! . . ."

"Utopian," observes a scholar, often is used pejoratively to describe a state of mind "incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs." But, he continues, it is also possible to perceive "utopian" as an "orientation which transcends reality and breaks the bonds of the existing order." (Karl Mannheim: *Ideology and Utopia.*) It is now impossible to consider Mondrian's position as unrealistic.

Piet Mondrian was the sanest human being I have ever known. His personality enjoyed the luxury of the consistent unity of his philosophical values with the way he actually lived, worked and related to others. His inner and outer life was extraordinarily full, free of anything superfluous—like his paintings. Impeccably honest and responsible, he was too accepting, too understanding of differences to waste himself on the trivia of polemics, anger, bitterness or anxiety. Not that he couldn't be abrupt, opposed and firm when dissatisfied, but he was too positive (not *positivistic*), too optimistic, too detached from the market-place and the political machinations of the art world to deviate from the surety of his art and thought.

When he would encounter the common misrepresentations of his paintings and writings, he would comment with some chagrin, "They (meaning the writers) always think they know better than we (meaning the artists)." Then he would shake his head a little sadly, "Writers are the greatest criminals." Or, "Life is full of obstacles, but life is always right!"; by which he meant that one could only try to comprehend and accept the reality of the existing plurality of viewpoints, the limitations of others. He never doubted that time, education and experience would ultimately sustain the truths of his own vision, always centered in reality.

And time is showing the central force of Piet Mondrian's art and life, inseparable indeed from his personality, from his painting, from his thought, which he dedicated, printed in large letters in *Le Néo-Plasticisme, 1920,* AUX HOMMES FUTURS.*

Harry Holtzman, Lyme, Connecticut.

**From the Introduction to The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships and the other essays by Piet Mondrian, to be published by Viking Press, 1974, Documents of XXth Century Art.*

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*Piet Mondrian and the Hague School of Landscape Painting*
Catalogue with texts by Nancy E. Dillow and Robert Welsh
(This exhibition traveled to Edmonton and Montreal)

Paris, Orangerie des Tuileries, *Mondrian.*
Catalogue introduction by Michel Seuphor

1970 New York, Pace Gallery *Mondrian: The Process Works*
Catalogue introduction by Harry Holtzman

1971 New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
*Piet Mondrian, 1872-1964. Centennial Exhibition.*
Catalogue with texts by Dr. L. J. F. Wijsenbeek, Joop Joosten, Nelly van Doesburg, Max Bill, Charmion von Wiegand.

New York, Noah Goldowsky Gallery *The Early Works of Piet Mondrian*
Catalogue text by Robert P. Welsh

1973 Amersfoort, Zonnenhof *Piet Mondrian: een Dokumentatie*
Catalogue texts by Harry Holtzman and J. L. Locher

*List of Mondrian Exhibitions to 1966 will be found in *Art Gallery of Toronto, Piet Mondrian: 1872-1944, 1966* (exhibition catalogue).

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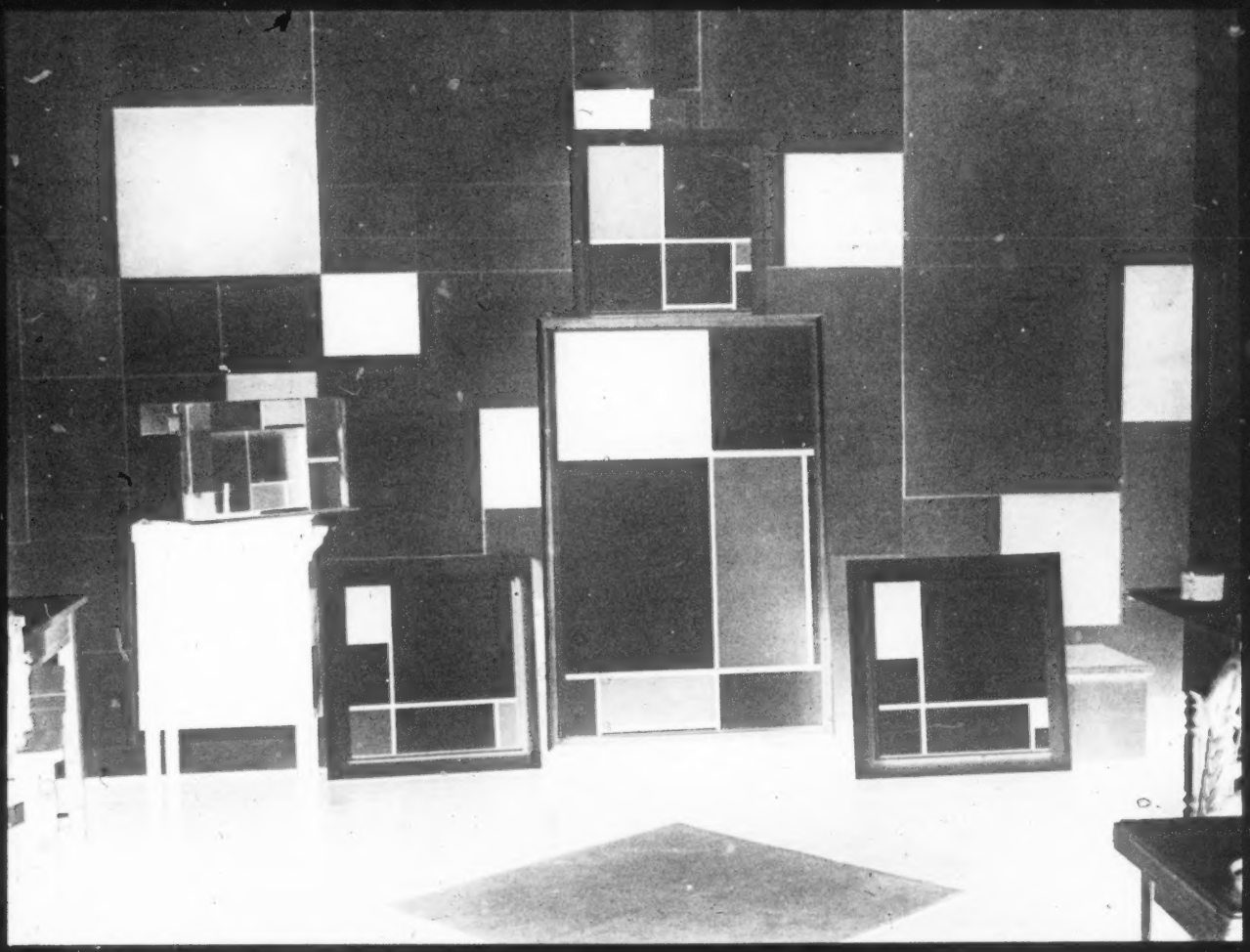
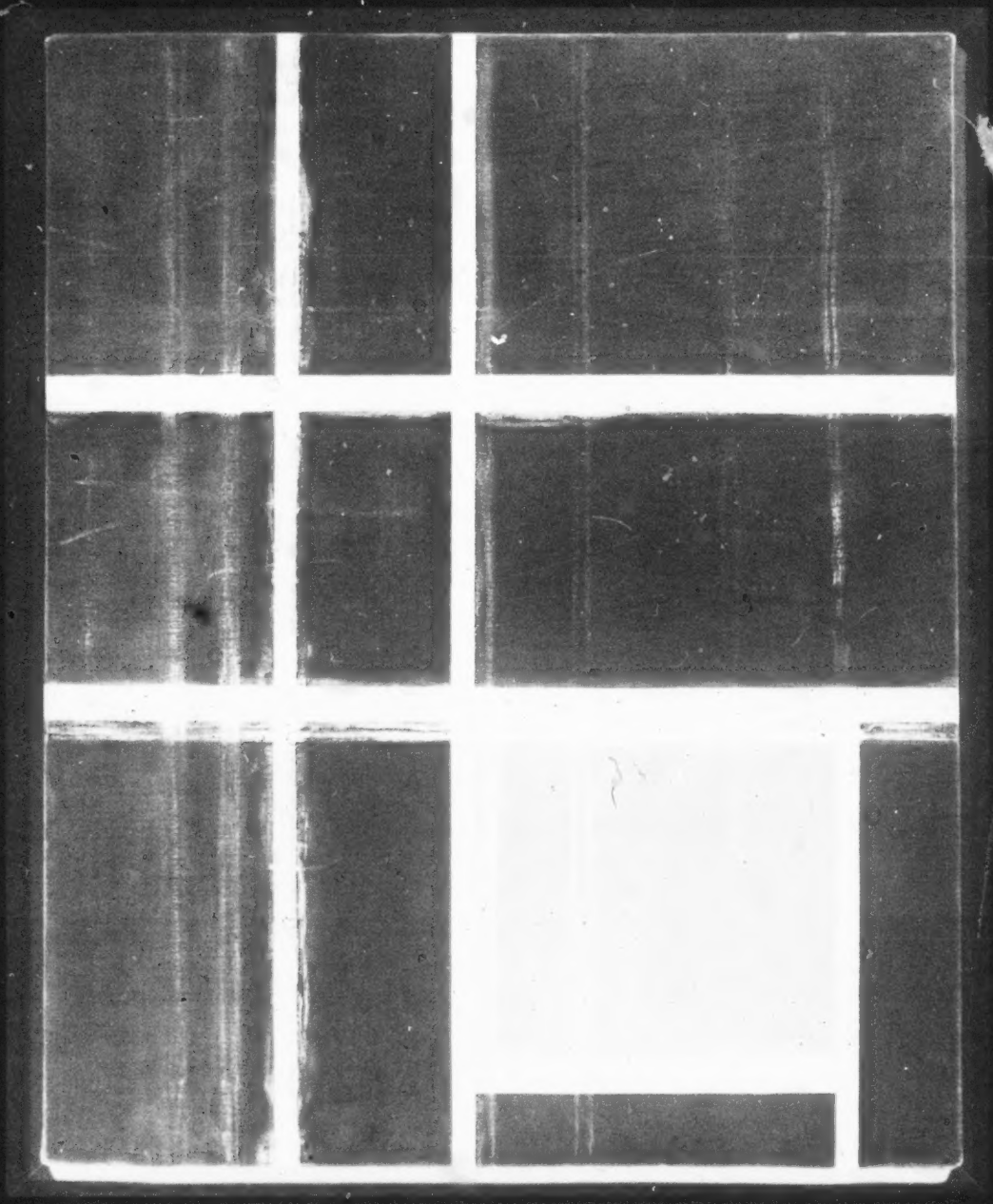
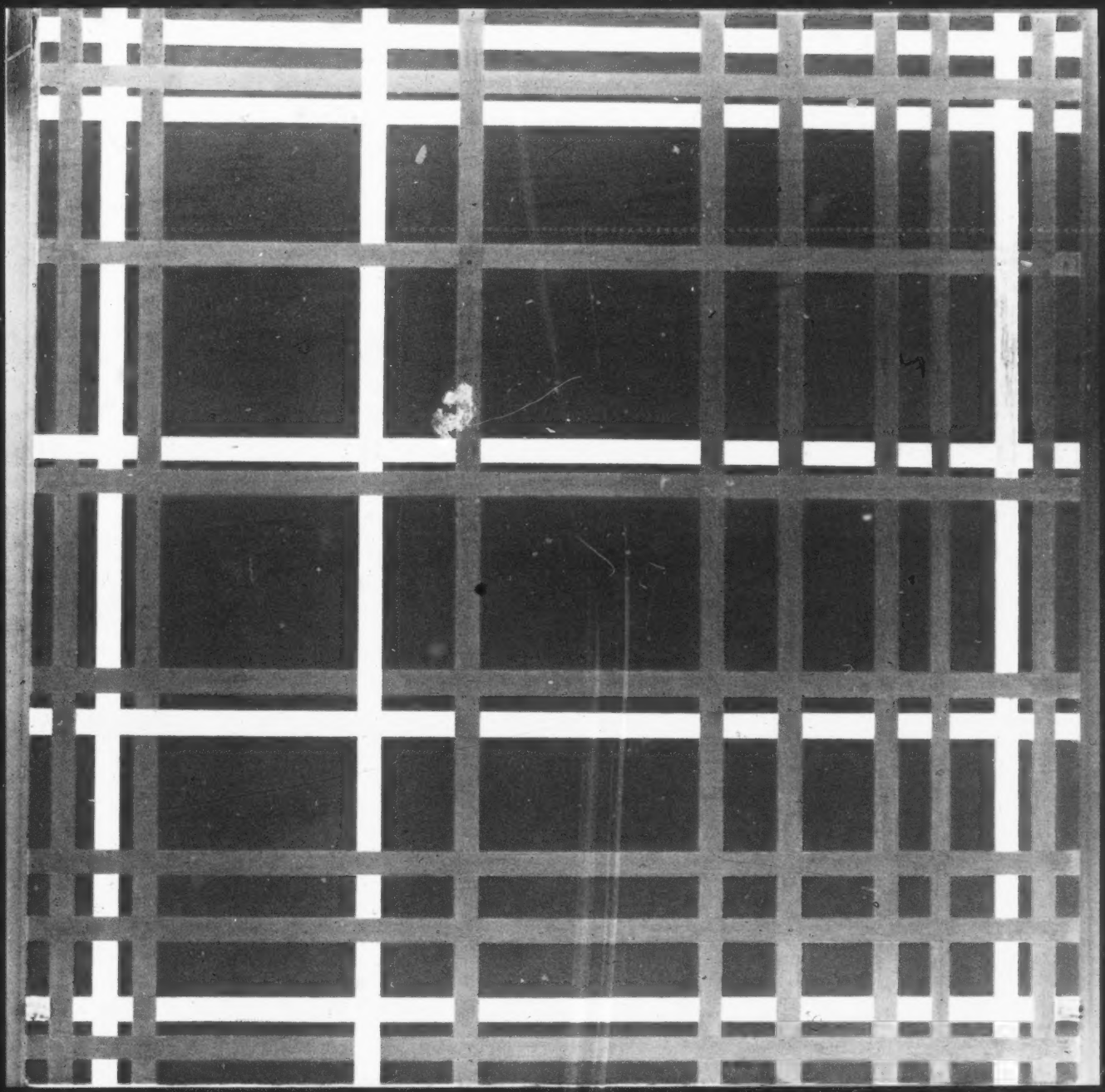


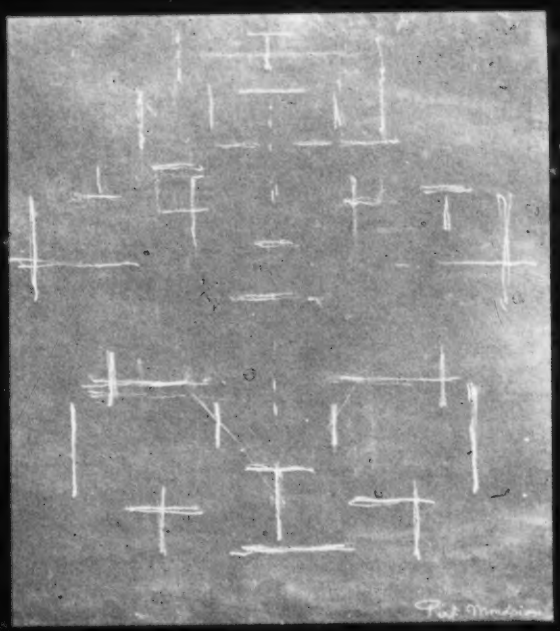
THE ARTIST'S STUDIO, PARIS ca. 1930



**5** COMPOSITION 1938-44 (unfinished)

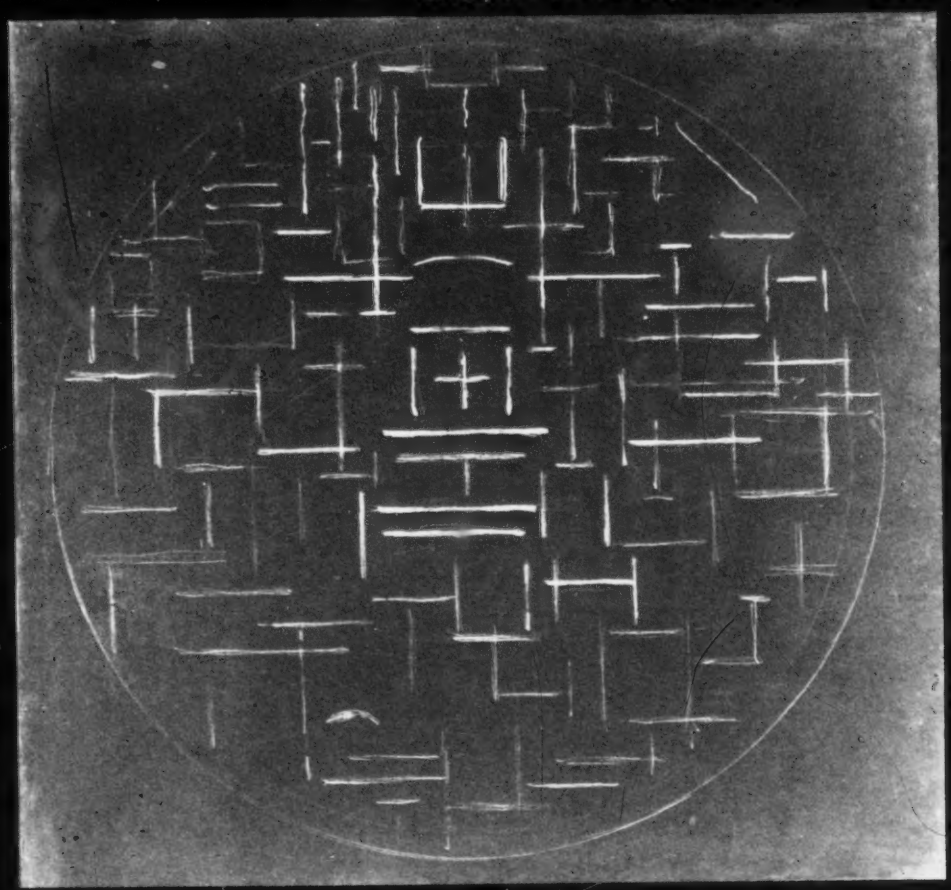


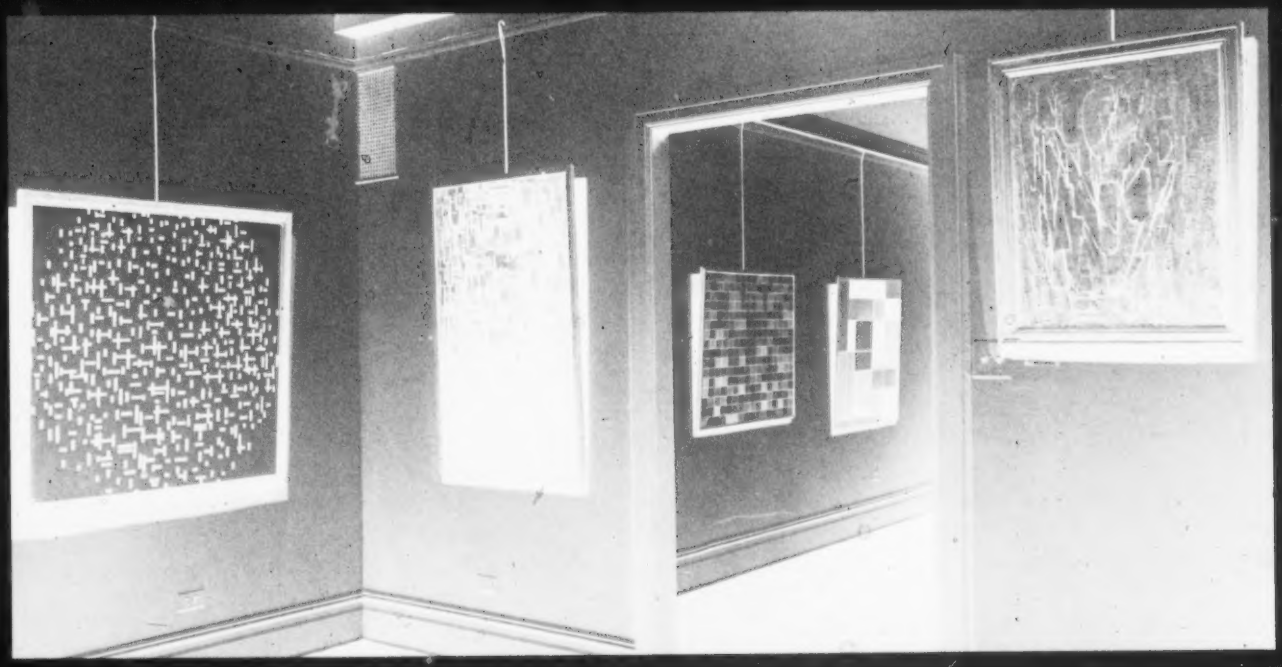
8 NEW YORK CITY I 1942



**3** STUDY, Plus & Minus 1914

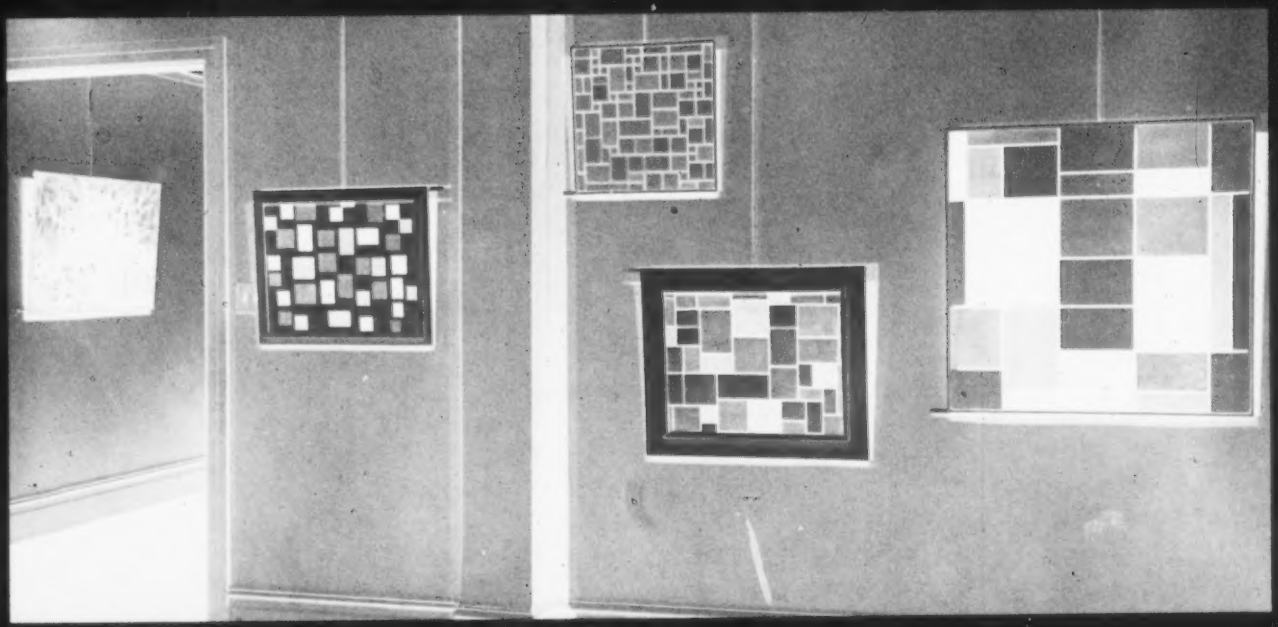
**1** CHURCH FACADE, Plus & Minus 1913





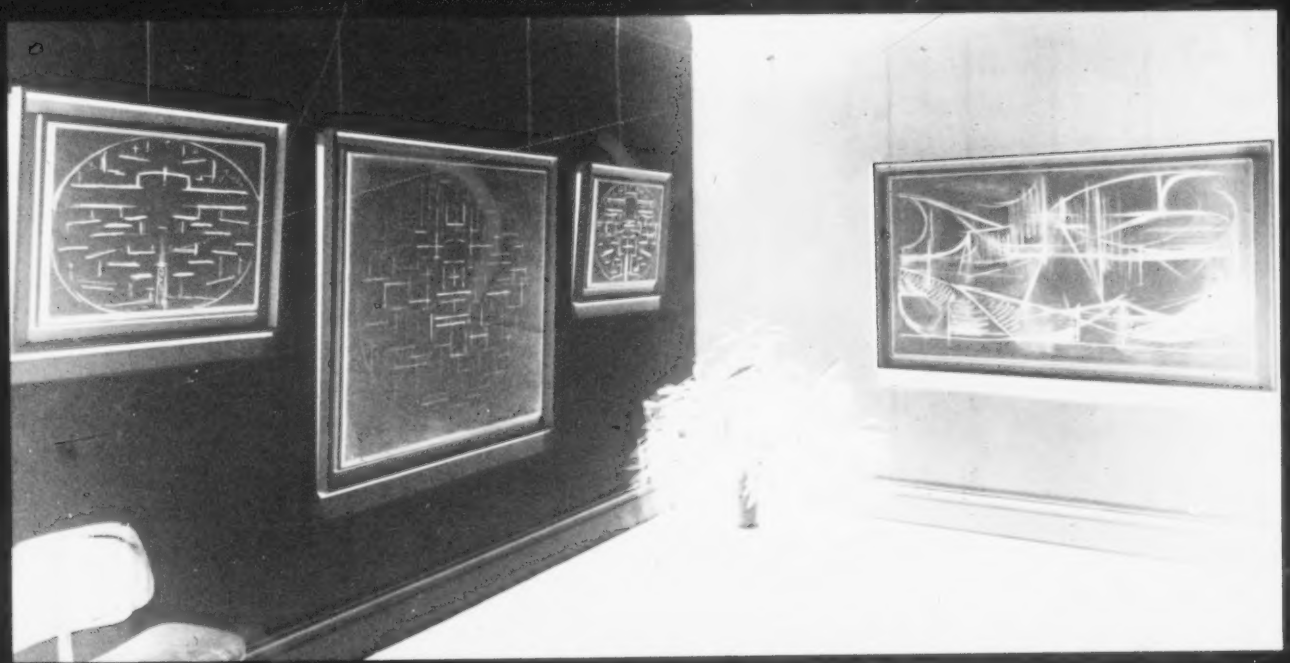
**257** VIEW MONDRIAN EXHIBITION, November 1949

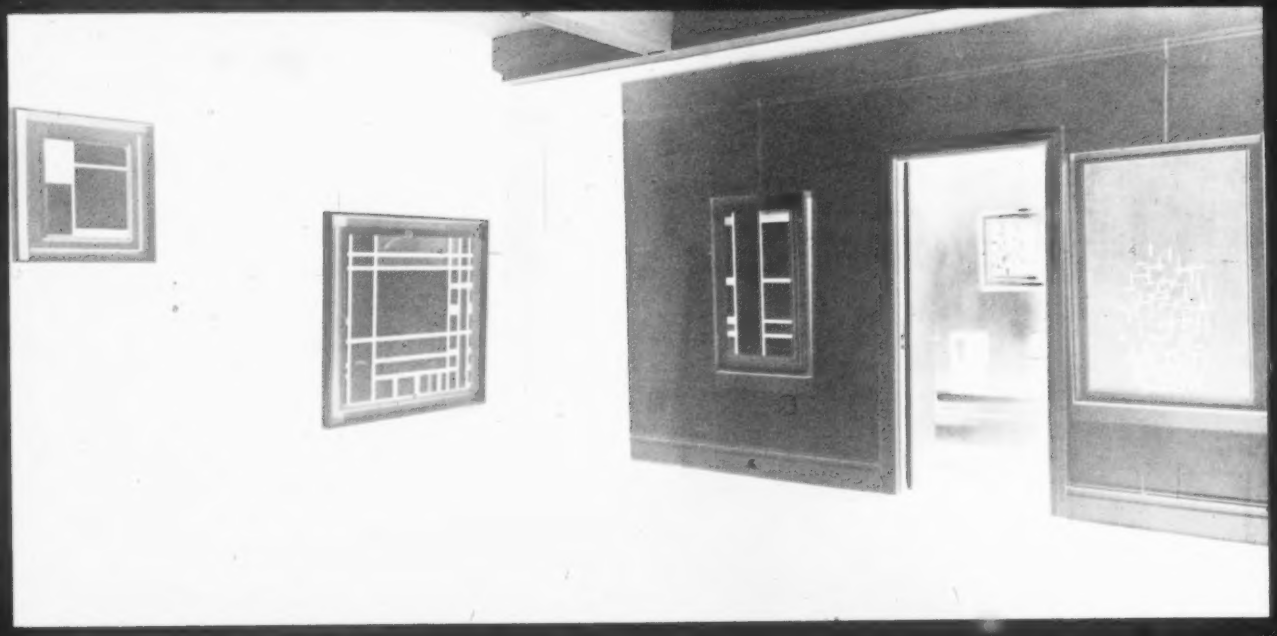
**258** VIEW MONDRIAN EXHIBITION, February-March 1951



**259** VIEW MONDRIAN EXHIBITION, November 1953

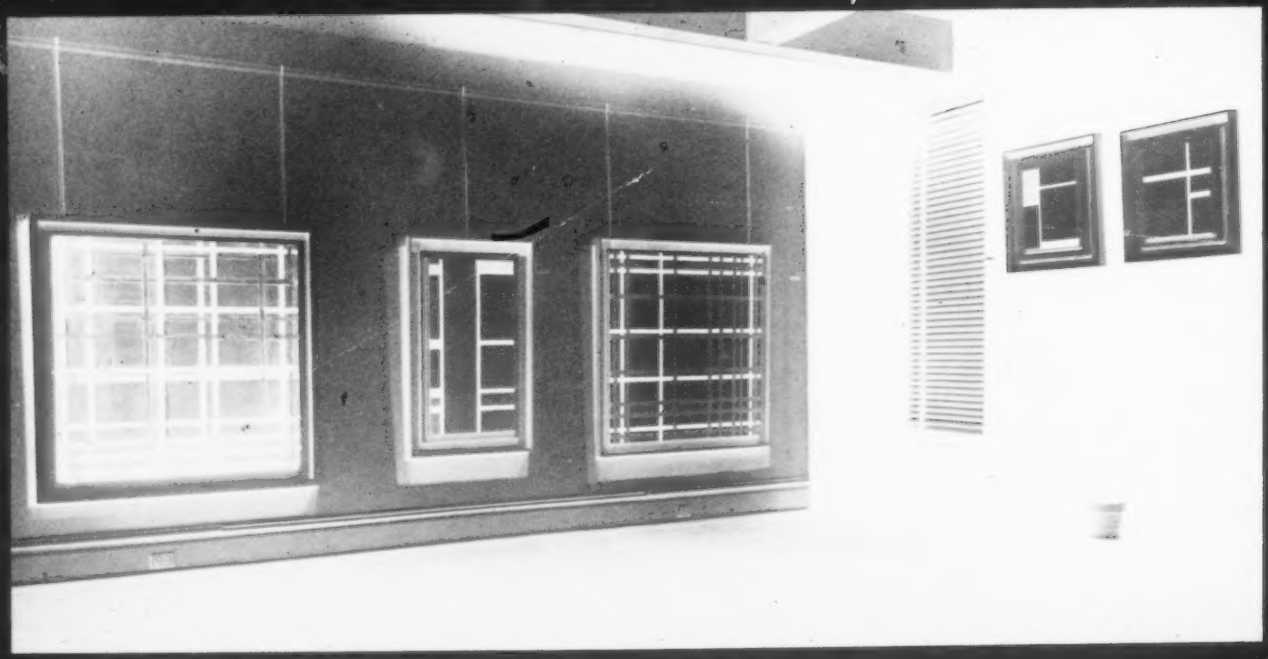
**263** VIEW MONDRIAN EXHIBITION, November 1963





**261** VIEW MONDRIAN EXHIBITION, January 1962

**260** VIEW MONDRIAN EXHIBITION, October 1957



**262** VIEW MONDRIAN EXHIBITION, January 1962

**264** VIEW MONDRIAN EXHIBITION, November 1963

# CATALOGUE

**1** *Church Facade, Plus & Minus 1913 Charcoal on paper 43¾ x 45″

**2** Pier and Ocean 1914 Charcoal & India Ink on paper 19¾ x 17½″

**3** *Study, Plus & Minus 1914 Charcoal on paper 19¾ x 17½″
*Collection: Harry Holtzman*

**4** Composition: Plus & Minus Study 1916 Oil & pencil on canvas 49 x 29″ (unfinished)

**5** *Composition 1938-44 Charcoal on canvas 27½ x 28½″ (unfinished)

**6** Composition Study ca. 1940 Pencil on paper 8 x 8″
*Collection: Harry Holtzman*

**7** Sketch ca. 1940 Pencil on board 4 x 4″
*Collection: Harry Holtzman*

**8** *New York City I 1942 Oil on canvas 47 x 45″

**9** New York City II 1942-44 Oil & Tape on canvas 45 x 47″ (unfinished)

**10** New York City III 1942-44 Oil & Tape on canvas 45 x 39″ (unfinished)

**11** Table 29½ x 27½ x 25½″ (designed and constructed by the Artist)

**12** Table 30 x 28 x 24″ (designed and constructed by the Artist)

**13-75** Photographs of Mondrian, his family, his friends, his studio

**76-100** Official Documents

**101-138** Manuscripts

**139-197** Books, Catalogues and Gramaphone Records

**198-214** Printings

**Reproduced*

**215-224** Typescripts

**225-246** Artist's Equipment

**247-255** Mondrian, his Studio (Blow-up photographs)

**256** Mondrian's New York Studio 1944 Film by Harry Holtzman

**Views of Mondrian Exhibitions at the Gallery**

**257** ***Piet Mondrian: Paintings 1910—1944,** November 1949

**258** ***Piet Mondrian,** February-March 1951

**259** ***50 Years of Mondrian,** November 1953

**260** ***Mondrian,** October 1957

**261-262** ***Paintings by Mondrian, Early and Late and Work in Process,** January 1962

**263-264** ***Paintings, Drawings and Watercolors by Piet Mondrian,** November 1963

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